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IV.—SWINBURNE AND DELAVIGNE

For those who enjoy tracing literary relationships there is a very attractive problem in regard to the possible indebtedness of Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine* to Delavigne's *Les Limbes*. Swinburne's poem has long been a favorite, for its subtle cadences have elusive, indefinable melody, and the picture of the dim beauty of Proserpine's realm is a masterpiece of descriptive art. However one may regard the philosophy of languid surrender to extinction, one cannot fail to recognize Swinburne's power in depicting a pallid world where all things are wan, bloomless, and indeterminate.

Hitherto, no source for the *Garden of Proserpine* has been suggested except Christina Rossetti's *Dreamland* (1862), which, Mr. Payne considers, "has a curious resemblance" to Swinburne's poem. The similarity is chiefly that of verse-form: the theme of sleep is treated so very differently in the two poems that it does not seem possible to attribute specific influence here. The *Odyssey* (XI), the *Æneid* (VI), the *Inferno* (IV) offer little suggestion of the apathy, the abandonment, the paralysis of feeling which both Delavigne and Swinburne depict in a fashion that makes a comparison between the two inevitable. In theme, and in development of theme, in use of imagery, and in versification the *Garden of Proserpine* is similar to *Les Limbes*.

If there is an obligation on Swinburne's part, students of literature have the pleasure of noting how one poet has derived inspiration from another, and yet by following his own individual bent has transcended his original. The study of the psychological reaction upon the borrower, his

display of imaginative power in re-creating and developing a *motif* is very rewarding. On the other hand, if Swinburne was not influenced by Delavigne, the two poems deserve to be compared as illustrating two distinctive literary methods of treating similar material.

Casimir Delavigne (1793-1843) was a member of the French Academy, a highly popular dramatist and poet, whose work would undoubtedly be known by Swinburne, the widely-read student of French literature. Delavigne's Works, finally published in 1845, contained *Un Miracle*, a very mediocre performance, in the main. *Chant Premier, Le Retour du Bal*, relates the death of the only daughter of a doting, very worldly mother. *Chant Deuxième, Les Limbes*, describes Limbo, whither the maiden went; *Chant Troisième, Jésus Christ dans les Limbes*, is a sort of *Harrowing of Hell*; *Chant Quatrième, Le Retour de l'Église*, describes the miracle of the daughter's restoration to life. *Les Limbes* far surpasses the other parts, possessing charm and distinction in the description of the lower world of faint, arrested beauty.

When *The Garden of Proserpine* was published in 1866 in the volume called *Poems and Ballads*, *Les Limbes* had been before the public for twenty years in Delavigne's collection, *Poèmes et Ballades sur l'Italie*. The two poems may best be compared by means of quotation, for space does not permit reprinting them *in toto*. *Les Limbes* will be found in *Poésies de Casimir Delavigne*, Paris, 1856, or in *The Oxford Book of French Verse*. *The Garden of Proserpine* is included in Payne's *Selected Poems of Swinburne*, in Page's *British Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, and in similar anthologies.

Les Limbes falls into three rather distinct divisions. The first is the description of the natural aspects of Limbo.

I quote the first four stanzas of the poem.

1. Comme un vain rêve du matin,
Un parfum vague, un bruit lointain,
C'est je ne sais quoi d'incertain
Que cet empire;
Lieux qu'à peine vient éclairer
Un jour qui, sans rien colorer,
A chaque instant près d'expirer,
Jamais n'expire.
2. Partout cette demi-clarté
Dont la morne tranquillité
Suit un crépuscule d'été,
Ou de l'aurore,
Fait pressentir que le retour
Va poindre au céleste séjour,
Quand la nuit n'est plus, quand le jour
N'est pas encore!
3. Ce ciel terne, où manque un soleil,
N'est jamais bleu, jamais vermeil;
Jamais brise, dans ce sommeil
De la nature,
N'agita d'un frémissement
La torpeur de ce lac dormant,
Dont l'eau n'a point de mouvement,
Point de murmure.
4. L'air n'entr'ouvre sous sa tiédeur
Que fleurs qui, presque sans odeur,
Comme les lis ont la candeur
De l'innocence;
Sur leur sein pâle et sans reflets
Languissent des oiseaux muets:
Dans le ciel, l'onde et les forêts,
Tout est silence.

The first stanza of *The Garden* is as follows:

Here, where the world is quiet;
Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
In doubtful dreams of dreams;

I watch the green field growing
For reaping folk and sowing,
For harvest-time and mowing,
A sleepy world of streams.

The reader will note at once the likeness of the eight line stanza form, and more particularly the similarity of cadence in the two poems. Although the French poem is written in tetrameter, with lines four and eight in dimeter, while Swinburne uses trimeter throughout, the effects are almost the same, because of the harmonious use of feminine ending. Even where the French may technically require a final stress, the normal pronunciation of the words makes the accents at the end of the lines as hovering and tentative as are the natural beauties described in the verses. The abuse of alliteration by Swinburne owes nothing to the French.

These stanzas illustrate the typical likenesses and differences in the work of the two poets. Five of Swinburne's lines are, as will be seen later, evidently suggested by Delavigne, while three lines (5, 6, 7) are not. The French poet is describing a Catholic world, while Swinburne is picturing a world presided over by a Roman goddess whose symbols are the corn, the poppy, and the swallow. Delavigne is objective and inclined to catalogue descriptive effects, but Swinburne constantly emphasizes the subjective element, and always selects very distinctive details to heighten the illusion of his description. Whatever the English poet borrows he re-shapes in individual fashion.

Turning now to the points of resemblance, it will be convenient to follow the French poem stanza by stanza, indicating by quotation from the English what lines seem reminiscent of the French.

Swinburne, like Delavigne, devotes several stanzas to describing the physical aspects of the lower world. Like

Delavigne he begins with a simile intended to bring out the scene of quiet and repose. To Delavigne the empire is like an empty dream, a vague fragrance, a distant sound, or something doubtful, indeterminate. To Swinburne it is a world of quiet where even feeling is as spent as waves and winds. "Vain rêve" seems to have become "doubtful dreams of dreams"; "bruit" may, possibly, have turned into "riot." In stanzas one and two Delavigne depicts the slow alteration of light, an image which Swinburne appears to condense into these lines which occur in a later section of the poem:

All night till light is born;
And like a soul belated,
In hell and heaven unmated,
By cloud and mist abated
Comes out of darkness morn.

Delavigne's third stanza is evidently the source of

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight—

where "shaken" is a happy rendering of "frémissement," and the last line is very close to: "point de mouvement, point de murmure." Is it not significant that the sequence of ideas in Swinburne's four lines is the same as in Delavigne's stanza? May not

Dead winds' and spent waves' riot

have been suggested by Delavigne's lines? And do not "Ce sommeil de la nature" and "ce lac dormant" appear, in Swinburne's first stanza,

A sleepy world of streams— ?

The fourth stanza of the French poem speaks of the presence of those flowers only which like the lily are white as innocence and almost without fragrance. Swinburne, apparently, developed this much more effectively and specifically:

But no such winds blow hither,
And no such things grow here.

No growth of moor or coppice,
No heather-flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
For dead men deadly wine.

Here the pallor of growing things is accentuated, although Swinburne adds to the effect by independent touches that give contrast. The presence of pale flowers over which silent birds droop is mentioned by Delavigne, and Swinburne in a stanza towards the end of his poem seems to recall this, when he writes:—

Where summer songs ring hollow
And flowers are put to scorn.

It should be observed that the idea of silence in the world is the climax of the French poet's description, while in Swinburne's poem it is the initial idea:

Here, where the world is quiet.

Delavigne's second division describes the dwellers in the lower world:

5. Loin de Dieu, là, sont renfermés
Les milliers d'êtres tant aimés,
Qu'en ces bosquets inanimés
La tombe envoie.

Le calme d'un vague loisir,
 Sans regret comme sans désir,
 Sans peine comme sans plaisir,
 C'est là leur joie.

6. Là, ni veille ni lendemain!
 Ils n'ont sur un bonheur prochain,
 Sur celui qu'on rappelle en vain,
 Rien à se dire.
 Leurs sanglots ne troublent jamais
 De l'air l'inaltérable paix;
 Mais aussi leur rire jamais
 N'est qu'un sourire.
7. Sur leurs doux traits que de pâleur!
 Adieu cette fraîche couleur
 Qui de baiser leur joue en fleur
 Donnait l'envie!
 De leurs yeux, qui charment d'abord,
 Mais dont aucun éclair ne sort,
 Le morne éclat n'est pas la mort,
 N'est pas la vie.
8. Rien de bruyant, rien d'agité
 Dans leur triste félicité!
 Ils se couronnent sans gaieté
 De fleurs nouvelles.
 Ils se parlent, mais c'est tout bas;
 Ils marchent, mais c'est pas à pas;
 Ils volent, mais on n'entend pas
 Battre leurs ailes.

Swinburne also describes the aspect and mood of those
 who dwell below. With Delavigne's

là, sont renfermés
 Les milliers d'êtres tant aimés,
 Qu'en ces bosquets inanimés

may be compared various lines, such as

There go the loves that wither,
 and

Pale, without name or number,
 In fruitless fields of corn.

The general sense of the four French stanzas seems to be summed up in the following lines by Swinburne, where he emphasizes the listless calm, the peace, the absence of desire:

We are not sure of sorrow,
 And joy was never sure;
 To-day will die to-morrow;
 Time stoops to no man's lure;
 And love, grown faint and fretful
 With lips but half regretful
 Sighs, and with eyes forgetful
 Weeps that no loves endure.

From too much love of living,
 From hope and fear set free.

And also:

I am tired of tears and laughter,
 And men that laugh and weep;
 Of what may come hereafter
 For men that sow to reap:
 I am weary of days and hours,
 Blown buds of barren flowers,
 Desires and dreams and powers
 And every thing but sleep.

Analyzing the lines one sees the first line of Delavigne's sixth stanza reappearing in

To-day will die to-morrow.

Lines two and three of the French have an antithesis that probably suggested

We are not sure of sorrow,
 And joy was never sure.

In reading Delavigne did not Swinburne, by a flash of suggestion, think of the adjective "sure" when he saw the preposition "sur"? Such things do influence poets. The other lines in this French stanza may have suggested

With lips but half regretful

and the passage about "tears and laughter." The seventh stanza has some distinct pictures, imitated by Swinburne. "Pâleur" is reproduced in

Pale, without name or number.

The rest of the stanza is really given in

Though one were fair as roses,
His beauty clouds and closes—

where Swinburne has combined the images of the passing of the fresh color and the clouding of the eyes. In the eighth stanza of the French is the reference to the crowning with flowers. Swinburne, later on, pictures Proserpine as "crowned." The image of noiseless wings may have some kinship to

The old loves with wearier wings.

The third division of Delavigne's poem has less relation to Swinburne, although there are some significant resemblances. Delavigne pictures a feminine figure who is the centre of interest, a timid maiden who is afraid to mingle with other shades.

Belle enfant, calme tes douleurs;
Là sont des fruits, là sont des fleurs
Dont tu disposes.
Laisse-toi tenter, et, crois-moi,
Cueille ces roses sans effroi;
Car, bien que pâles comme toi,
Ce sont des roses.

But the maiden still weeps, and the last stanza of the French is:

Dieu permet-il qu'un souvenir
Laisse ton cœur entretenir
D'un bien qui ne peut revenir
L'idée amère?

“—Oui, je me souviens du passé,
 Du berceau vide où j'ai laissé
 Mon rêve à peine commencé,
 Et de ma mère.”

Swinburne, also, pictures a feminine figure, the centre of all things, but she is dominant, not fearful.

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves she stands
 Who *gathers* all things mortal
 With cold immortal hands;
 Her languid lips are sweeter
 Than love's who fears to greet her
 To men that *mix* and meet her
 From many times and lands.

Forgets the earth her *mother*,
 The life of *fruits* and corn.

Here the italicized words have some kinship with the French. The word *mix* in Swinburne is far more intelligible if we remember the lines from Delavigne,

Qui ne mêle pas à leurs jeux
 Ses ailes blanches.

In concluding, Delavigne and Swinburne differ essentially. Swinburne asserts vehemently that there is no return to life:

Only the sleep eternal
 In an eternal night.

The relationships between the two poems may be summed up thus: The theme of each poem is the lower world; the development of the theme, in each poem, proceeds from a description of the natural aspects to a description of the wan, listless beings who inhabit this lower world, and concludes in a third section depicting a central feminine figure who is surrounded by

Dead dreams of days forsaken.

The philosophy of the two poets is entirely different, the imagery of the two poems has many resemblances. In every stanza of *The Garden of Proserpine* there is some phrase, line, or idea, which is similar to something in *Les Limbes*. There are some interesting instances of similar juxtaposition of detail, or phrase; and in stanza structure, cadence, melody, description of tenuous, hesitant beauty, the poems have a certain agreement.

May not the history of the creation of *The Garden of Proserpine* be as follows? Swinburne, who had been at work on *The Hymn to Proserpine*, where the doctrine of annihilation is vividly expressed, may have read Delavigne's poem. Certain lines and stanzas perhaps remained indelibly impressed upon his memory, and the music of the lines haunted him. Did he not blend the traditional home of Pluto, presided over by the pagan divinities, with Delavigne's *Limbo*, making a poem highly distinctive and vivid?

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